

**City of Worcester Accessibility Advisory Commission
Tuesday, November 21, 2023, 4:30 PM Meeting Minutes**

**City Hall, Levi Lincoln Chamber (3rd floor)
Hybrid Meeting**

ASL interpreters onsite and video

https://teams.microsoft.com/l/meetup-join/19%3ameeting_MTJhNDdmNjQtMGZlMy00ZWVlLThhZWQtZiQ0MjVhMjBhNTVh%40thread.v2/0?context=%7b%22Tid%22%3a%22f25998dd-1be6-42c6-a44c-8785f3e6deb6%22%2c%22Oid%22%3a%2202af705d-5ebe-4000-83cf-64efc45b8c33%22%7d

Meeting number: 271 185 130 443 Password: SEg7KZ

**Join by phone: 469-998-7682 Access code: 397 384
563#**

Attendance:

Members Present: Robert Bureau, Darya Karuna, Elizabeth Myska, Joseph Prochilo

Members Absent: James Delage, John Finn, Jr., Stephen Stolberg

Staff: Victor Perez, Dawn E. Clark

Guests:

**Niko Vangjeli, City Clerk and Claire Robbins, Deputy City Clerk
Senator Robyn Kennedy
MA Commission for the Blind Commissioner John Oliveira and Central MA
Regional Director Mervyn Campbell**

Call to order, instructions for virtual meeting, introductions

Chairperson Bureau requested Director Perez provide the technology instructions for public access to the meeting. A unanimous roll call vote was taken to start the meeting at 4:48 pm. Chairperson Bureau elevated Associate Commissioner Joseph Prochilo to full member for the meeting.

Approval of September 21, 2023 meeting minutes

Commissioner Prochilo moved to approve the September 21, 2023 minutes as written and seconded by Commissioner Myska. The motion was unanimously approved on roll call.

Approval of October 17, 2023 meeting minutes

Commissioner Karuna moved to approve the October 17, 2023 minutes as written and seconded by Commissioner Prochilo. The motion was unanimously approved on roll call.

Review of 2023 Election cycle for accessibility concerns with City Clerk 's Office

Administering elections especially in Worcester is a daunting task. With him is Clair Robbins, Deputy City Clerk. She does the day-to-day tasks in the Clerk's Office. Every election is different. The November election was expressly difficult because there was a State election in the midst of the local election. In addition, two years ago, Worcester was sued over the way the school committee was elected and entered into an agreement: This year district school committee ballots were included. There were five City Council and six school committee districts. The election process looked a little different this year. The voter turnout approached 20%.

The Office offered more programs this year:

- Early voting in person for both September and November election
- Mail in voting: 9,000 requested and over 6,000 were returned
- Accessible vote option – The City works with Democracy Live that has a program by which voters with accessibility needs request to vote through the Secretary of State website. They receive a link with instructions on how to vote at State and local levels. 30 people chose this option this year. This is not

the same process as an absentee ballot as the voting happens online, rather than by mail. If someone would prefer to do a paper ballot, they can do that.

Commissioner's question:

How can the Commission help increase voter turnout?

Clerk:

Good question – as of the September election 7,000 requests for mail in ballots had been received and by November 9,000 had been received, but only 6,000 ballots were returned. We sent out cards to all registered voters with where to vote and dates, school committee information, etc. The mail cost over \$70,000. There was a concern about possible confusion with the District School Committee voting. Mailings went out several times. This is why the City Manager and City Council supported this funding. The turnout was almost 20% while the last election was 16.5%. There were many more options this election than in the past.

The Office did everything possible to encourage voting and is willing to receive recommendations from the Commission as it has received from the City Council and the Election Commission to tweak the advertising process for the next election.

Recommendation:

Commissioner appreciated all the work the Office did, which increased voter turnout from 16% to 20%. He did recommend that the Clerk address how many accessible entrances were not well marked.

Clerk:

The Office will work with the Commission to make sure appropriate signage is available at polling locations.

Member of the public:

Voting has improved for her over the years and think the City Clerk's office has done a good job. She wondered how many Deaf voted. She suggests having a meeting with the Deaf community with ASL Interpreters to help ask questions and share responses.

Member of the public:

Thanked the Clerk for offering voting on the computer. This truly has been a game changer for the blind and visually impaired community. Did anyone attempt to use the AutoMark machine? They are aging out.

Clerk:

This is a concern. The AutoMark (independent voting machine) was introduced in 2000 and the State bought them in 2005. Every election the Clerk's Office spends days and days getting them to work properly. When they get to the polls there are problems. The Secretary of State is aware of this issue as well as legislators. There is a dire need for usable independent voting machines in Massachusetts and needs to be funding for new accessible voting machines. In 2020 there was federal dollars for elections. The Clerk is not aware of what these dollars were spent for.

Member of the Public:

For those people who qualify for an accessible ballot and don't have access to a computer, is there access to a library computer or other computer?

Assistant Clerk:

People can access their online accessible ballot by using their access code. This can be from whatever computer.

Member of the Public:

Is there public awareness campaign for the visually impaired on these options?

Assistant Clerk:

Yes, the Bay State Council for the Blind was visited in October and provided information on all the voting options. Last year a video was produced that explains the mail in voting for the visually impaired and is on the website.

Clerk:

There are limitations for people who cannot access computers, but that is why they expanded early in-person voting.

Member of the Public:

Can there be a proxy that can get a code for an eligible person without an email address?

Clerk:

No, a visually impaired or overseas military person are the only people who have access to this program's portal.

Commissioner:

Can a mobile phone be used to access this?

Clerk:

Mobile Phones, iPads and Smart Phones can be used with the individual's access code. This is a huge change for the voter.

Commissioner:

Is there a time limit on absentee ballots?

Clerk:

Most people are using the mail in ballot. Of the 9,000 requested ballots there were about 190 absentee ballots.

Member of the Public:

Advertising video mentioned earlier should be in ASL and captioned as well and shared with the Deaf Community.

Clerk:

He thought the video was in ASL. They will take a look and make sure if translation is needed.

Member of the Public:

Please make sure the video is captioned.

White Cane Day Commemoration

Commissioner Myska, who is blind, began by describing herself for the Blind. She

recognized Senator Robyn Kennedy who was present and has experienced training in the use of the white cane. White Cane Day began in 1964 under President Johnson to be a symbol of independence for Blind and Visually Impaired people. We have had our own Worcester twist on White Cane Day.

When she first heard of White Cane Day, she was a member of the Regional Council for the Commission for the Blind. She asked what it was. She was told that the Day was a gathering at the State capital where a politician read a proclamation, there is a visual, media is present, and a picture is taken. When she asked what the Blind people do, she was told they gather for the picture. She thought to herself how is there co-mingling of the two populations. When she asked, she was met with silence.

She is a doer so back in 2015 or so, they started blindfolding City employees and other dignitaries in the City to help them walk in the shoes of those who are visually impaired. They were paired with a guide and walked the urban environment. There are a lot of obstacles in the sidewalks. The walks ended with debriefing sessions to hear what people's experiences were.

In 2023, White Cane Day was celebrated three different times.

- October 13th at the State House, Senator Kennedy was one of the speakers. She gave a shout out to us.
- October 14th a walk from Saint Vincent's Hospital to the Transportation Hub with optometry, medical high school students and volunteers of all ages and races: some blindfolded, some guides to experience what it is like to be blind.
- October 15th (Official White Cane Day) at Worcester State University five dignitaries were blindfolded including a traffic engineer, the City's Medical Director, Dr. Michael Hirst, the Chair of the Planning Board, and a few others. This was a small group as compared to previous years.

The day's theme was mobility. Thanks goes to the Department of Transportation & Mobility and the Planning Department.

Commissioner Myska invited Senator Kennedy to speak if she wished to add anything. From her perspective the two most important words are truncated domes.

The City is blessed to have leadership like Liz. She has done a wonderful job educating us. The Senator had her first walk blindfolded and says we really don't understand people's experience until we know someone else's world. These walks have given people information of the inaccessibility some of the sidewalks are and the opportunity to do better.

As chair of the Senate's Joint Committee on Children, Family and Persons with Disabilities, we work with Commission for the Blind, Commission on Deaf & Hard of Hearing, Mass Rehabilitation, and others. We and others need to think about wholistically about life and services like sidewalks. We think style over safety and style over accessibility. We can do both and we need to do both. Someday, we will figure out how to get those truncated domes faced in the right direction. It is so frustrating to see a truncated dome with the sole propose of the safety of others not installed correctly.

Conversation with MA Commission for the Blind Commissioner John Oliveira and Central MA Regional Director Mervyn Campbell

The Commission is providing services through the Regional Commission office, Carrol Center, Inc. and Polis Center, Inc. Training will be individually provided as well as in small groups.

The media campaign was targeted to employers letting them know people who are blind can work is wrapping up. There are some new employers through this campaign. The Commission has lots of other employers they have been working with over time. They work with interns which often turn into jobs for the consumers. They attend the job fairs. They participate in the Commission's various committees helping to develop opportunities.

The Commission is using some reallotment funding for the Regional Services Administration (unspent funds for previous year) to provide a service data dashboard. People have been asking for service data over the years like how many people does the Commission serve, etc. This will help provide data to the public.

As a result of the COVID experience the idea of a reverse job fair came into being. Instead of consumers trying to traverse tables spread out in a room, job applicants would present a one or two-minute pitch to employers via an online platform. Resumes will be sent in advance to all the employers watching. If an employer is interested in a particular consumer they will reach out and have a conversation.

Orientation and Mobility training is available and essential for those who have a job. Technology training is provided according to the individual. Tuition and books are paid for those who are eligible. Even if a person wants a guide dog, these schools want to have the person have the Orientation and Mobility training should the dog get sick etc.

Information on winter snow removal and assistance for seniors and persons with disabilities:

- www.worcesterma.gov/streets/winter-weather
- [keep-worcester-walking.pdf \(worcesterna.gov\)](http://www.worcesterma.gov/keep-worcester-walking.pdf)
- [snow-emergency-brochure.pdf \(worcesterna.gov\)](http://www.worcesterma.gov/snow-emergency-brochure.pdf)

The Keep Worcester Walking link provides the ordinance (requirements) about snow removal.

Update on Chief Equity Officer Job Description and Search Process

Since the last meeting the internal search Committee met with GovHR and the City Manager's Office to review the culled recommended candidates, about 10. There will be two rounds of interviews. The first round will be next week with City employees and the second round the following week with member each of the Accessibility Advisory and Human Rights Commissions, City employees, and other non-profits. A final interview of selected candidates will be with the City Manager, who will make the ultimate decision.

Review of AAB notices and applications: (No City property)

Notice of Action

- 222 Harrington Way
- 670 West Boylston Street

No Action Taken

Suggestions for future agenda items

Announcements:

- **Festival of Lights – Worcester Common – December 1, 2023, 4:30 – 9PM**
- **Next Accessibility Advisory Commission meeting:**
December 19, 2023 - 4:30pm

Adjournment:

Meeting was adjourned at 6:48pm by a unanimous roll call vote moved by Commissioner Bureau and seconded by Commissioner Myska. Approved by roll call.

*Material can be viewed at the Human Rights & Accessibility Office upon request.